



Islamic babble: portrayal of religious arabic phrases in english rhythm and blues (R&B) and hip-hop lyrics

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Received Date: May 17, 2024

Revised Date: July 01, 2024

Accepted Date: August 30, 2024

ABSTRACT

Background: The spread of rhythm and blues (R&B) and hip-hop songs among youth is undeniable nowadays. Besides the alluring arrangement of musical sounds those genres offer, people also appreciate the meaning of the lyrics. However, some musicians would slip religious Arabic phrases into their lyrics regardless of the song's overall content, evoking questions regarding their appropriateness. This research aims to raise awareness among Muslim youth about the implied message behind R&B and hip-hop songs, as well as to track the development of Islamic teachings regarding music. **Methods:** Mixed-method approach, consisting of questionnaires and follow-up interviews with respondents, was adopted in the data collection process. The data includes the opinions of 30 participants regarding the phenomenon of religious Arabic phrases in the lyrics of English R&B and hip-hop songs. **Findings:** This research has found five English hip-hop and R&B songs that contain religious Arabic phrases. A majority of the participants have heard of English hip-hop and R&B songs with religious Arabic phrases, and most of them understand the meaning behind the song lyrics. **Conclusion:** This research concludes that when employing religious Arabic phrases in English hip-hop and R&B, it is regarded as inappropriate and strictly prohibited if the phrases are utilized in a hypocritical context or to make light of religion. **Novelty/Originality of This Study:** This study raises awareness among Muslim youth about the implied messages behind R&B and hip-hop songs with religious Arabic phrases and tracks the development of Islamic teachings regarding music, addressing an area that combines contemporary music trends with religious sensitivity.

KEYWORDS: hip-hop; R&B; religious arabic phrase.

1. Introduction

Music is a form of art that is very close to our lives. From mobilizing, studying, and even resting, we tend to be unable to detach ourselves from the strains of songs on the radio or music player applications such as Spotify. Along with other advancements, music evolves continuously, creating new genres, such as rhythm and blues (R&B) and hip-hop, for artists to revamp. However, evolution does not always go down the positive road. While there is nothing to go against the musical arrangement, some songs contain explicit meanings in their lyrics and promote matters that contradict the values of certain groups of people.

According to Eltantawy & Isaksen (2020), there is a deep connection to the Islamic faith within the American hip-hop and R&B movement that dates back to the South Bronx, a humble neighborhood in New York City, in the early 1970s. Many rappers and singers of all

Cite This Article:

Kartika, D. R., Alpasya, M. R., & Purnomo, P. A. (2024). Islamic babble: portrayal of religious arabic phrases in english rhythm and blues (R&B) and hip-hop lyrics. *The Journal of Religion and Communication Studies*, 1(2), 94-102. <https://doi.org/.....>

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generations channel their creative energy into honoring and articulating their Muslim faith to build identity and consciousness. This fusion of creativity and religion serves as a personal defense against the racial, social, and economic oppression that pervades their daily lives. Simultaneously, much of American pop culture references obscene or sacrilegious social behaviors, such as extramarital sex, drug and alcohol use, and profane language (Rossman, 2009). The symbolic friction between American pop culture and traditional religious morality causes the abstention from cultural materials with immoral content (O'Brien, 2013).

Initially, Islamic hip-hop and R&B artists are distinct from others who are more integrated with the music industry. However, as time progressed, many rappers and singers began to incorporate obscene lyrics with Arabic phrases closely related to Islamic teachings, regardless of their religious beliefs. For instance, they include Allahu Akbar, Alhamdulillah, and Mashallah in song lyrics about drugs and sex.

Previous researches have explored the connection between Islamic hip-hop and identity (Chaney, 2016; Eltantawy & Isaksen, 2020; O'Brien, 2013; Thoma, 2011), as well as the culture and history of the hip-hop and R&B movement (Androutsopoulos & Scholz, 2006; Khabeer, 2007; Rabaka, 2013; Rose, 1994). However, none of these studies has looked into the phenomenon of religious Arabic phrases in questionable hip-hop and R&B song lyrics. Thus, this research emphasizes the portrayal of religious Arabic phrases in English hip-hop and R&B song lyrics.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Hip-Hop and R&B culture

In order to fully appreciate Islamic hip-hop and R&B, one must first understand its historical context (Khabeer, 2007).

Hip-hop began in the 1970s in New York City's ghettos as a youth culture movement. It spread throughout the United States and beyond to become a preferred mode of artistic, sociocultural, and political expression for a generation of globalized youth (Thoma, 2011). Along that line, rhythm and blues (R&B) is a musical genre developed by Black Americans in the 1940s and continuously refined to the present day. During the 1960s, R&B helped spread African American culture and popularized racial integration on the radio and in white society (Ogbar, 2019). According to Chaney (2016), R&B evolved from jazz, gospel, and soul music and focuses on singing, group harmonies, and a smooth, lush vocal style. In contrast, hip-hop sound is defined by rapping, DJing, sampling, scratching, and beatboxing. Unlike R&B, hip-hop is an entire culture in and of itself. While both are interrelated on a certain level, hip-hop and R&B are highly competitive cultures in which fame can be obtained by constantly performing and demonstrating one's abilities.

Hip-hop culture is defined by four major elements: MC'ing (rapping), DJing, B-boying (a variety of breakdancing dance styles), and graffiti art. Several scholars include the rap video as a fifth element because it developed its own style and genre conventions (Rose, 1994). Based on Thoma (2011), rap battles in hip-hop are associated with lyrical techniques such as boasting (self-promotion) and dissing (a verbal offense of the opponent).

With the spread of hip-hop and R&B from the United States to other parts of the world, English lost its monopoly as the only and unique musical language, and sociocultural and political issues, as well as numerous questions of youth cultures from various countries, nations, and cultures. While American linguistic studies (Smitherman, 2000; Alim, 2006) focused on Black Talk and interpreted hip-hop and R&B as Afro-American genres, research on European musical lyrics has revealed that European singers primarily use their mother tongue. On the other hand, bilingual second and third-generation migrants use the dominant language of the society in which they live (Androutsopoulos & Scholz, 2006), dialects and minority languages are also used (Nicolay & Waibel, 2006).

Rappers and singers outside the United States adopted hip-hop and R&B culture's structural elements and focused on issues relevant to their home countries. The North African community in France (Stemmler, 2010), the Asian community in the United Kingdom (Midolo, 2009), and the Turkish community in Germany (Androutopoulos & Scholz, 2006) are all strong supporters of hip-hop and R&B. These communities have a sizable Muslim population. Nonetheless, the topic of Islam in hip-hop has received insufficient attention.

2.2 *The history of islamic verses*

As if being in two different worlds, hip-hop and Islam have more in common than we think. In Islam, the tradition of reciprocating *syair* (a kind of rhyming prose or poetry) began with Prophet Muhammad's love for literature. Poetry had a significant and central position in the life of the Arab Jahiliyah community. They would compete to compose them and sing them in public and certain places, including the Ukaz market, Dzil Majannah, and Dzil Majaz.

The Arab Jahiliyah had great respect for a poet. They 'worshipped' and equated a poet to the position of a prophet. A person could not be considered perfect if he does not touch on poetry. In their view, a poet is an embodiment of knowledge and wisdom. As for how vital *syair* was for Arab society, Ibn Khaldun illustrates that poetry is a medium to memorialize historical experiences and events that occurred in the life of the Arab Jahiliyah community. Therefore, *syair* was used as a reference for one's knowledge, and they make it a benchmark to judge the quality and greatness of a person.

Furthermore, Ibn al-Nadim, through the book *Al-Fihrist*, narrates that the Arab Jahiliyah sanctified *syair* to a certain degree. They believed that the sacredness of form of art is an inseparable part of religion. Arab community maintains the tradition of poetry by passing it down from generation to generation. So, it is not surprising that they sing poem for their deceased family members. In fact, some of them would not perform it if they were not in a pure state or had not done an ablution.

In a time when ignorance proliferated, the Messenger of Allah was sent as an apostle to preach Islam. At that time, there was an assumption in the Arab community that the prophet Muhammad was not much different from a poet. Thus, Allah asserts in *Al-Haqqah*: 41, "It is not the prose of a poet as you claim, yet you hardly have any faith." This verse confirms that the Messenger of Allah was not a poet and that the Qur'an is not his prose. The prophetic status of the Prophet Muhammad and the revelations revealed to him did not make Islam close to the community then; still, the Prophet Muhammad did not oppose the tradition.

The Qur'an describes that the poets were followed by people who went astray and did all the talk without taking any action (*Ash-Shu'ara*: 224 - 226). The depiction is a criticism of the poet's behavior which is synonymous with boasting (lying). A similar warning was also conveyed by the Messenger of Allah so that we be careful of deceitful words. The Prophet (PBUH) said, "Indeed, among the clear words (*al-bayan*) is magic." There is power in the string of words, which can deceive someone. One must have a critical awareness not to get caught up in the parched strings of words.

The Prophet Muhammad was fully aware that prose is only a medium to convey messages. If poem is used as a medium to convey ill matters, then the Messenger of Allah does not allow it and even denounces it. So, he rebuked by saying, "The mouth of a person filled with pus is better than the mouth of a person filled with prose."

But on the other hand, it is not uncommon for the Prophet to praise friends who are fluent in creating prose with content that supports the truth and the *da'wah* of monotheism. Zaid bin Thabit is an example of one of the companions whose poem received good appreciation from the Prophet. Furthermore, the Prophet Muhammad did not keep his distance from the poetic tradition that was deeply rooted in Arab society. Listening to and singing poem is not a taboo that should be avoided. The problem is not in the verse but in how the poet uses it as a medium for the context and purpose of goodness in search for the truth.

3. Methods

This research employed a mixed-methods approach with questionnaires and interviews as its data collection procedures. The approach serves as a means of triangulation, aiming to obtain a thorough understanding of the context. The questionnaire, which included quantitative three-point Likert scales and a qualitative personal opinion section, was designed to provide a general perception accompanied by justifiable points of views. Individual interviews were conducted to further analyze questions in an in-depth way. While both have a complementarity function, this study emphasized more on the qualitative aspect, and the quantitative is limited to descriptive statistics only.

The participants of this study are senior English literature university students with Islamic background, with a total of 30 respondents. One participant was interviewed to explain their answers in the questionnaire further. To maintain confidentiality, the subject was given a pseudonym: Jamal.

In collecting the data, both the questionnaire and interviews were done in Bahasa Indonesia; thus, the interpretation and data analysis in this study are presented in their closest English translations. As contextual excerpts were found in the interview records, the main ideas are written in bold to assist the readers in understanding the result.

It should be noted that the findings of this study are inadequate to represent the perspective of other individuals with similar backgrounds, especially age range and education. Therefore, this study is expected to be exploratory in nature.

4. Results and Discussion

Having analyzed the data obtained from the questionnaire, we discovered two perspectives regarding the use of religious Arabic phrases in English hip-hop and R&B song lyrics. The results show that most students who understand the lyrics' meaning think that using religious Arabic phrases is inappropriate when the context of the song is sacrilege and questionable. Meanwhile, some students appreciate this phenomenon since it means the artists acknowledge Islamic teachings, even if it is just a little.

For starters, the table below shows that most respondents have heard of English R&B and hip-hop songs containing religious Arabic phrases.

Table 1. Students' exposure to specified songs

Question	Yes	Not sure	No
Have you ever heard of English R&B and hip-hop songs that contain religious Arabic phrases in their lyrics?	25 (83,3%)	3 (10%)	2 (6,7%)

Table 1 indicates that most of the respondents have heard of English R&B and hip-hop songs that contain religious Arabic phrases in their lyrics. Out of 30 respondents, 25 (83,3%) have heard of English hip-hop and R&B songs containing religious Arabic phrases, 3 (10%) are not sure whether they have heard such songs or not, and 2 (6,7%) have never heard of them at all.

Respondents who are part of the 83,3% then mentioned the titles of R&B and hip-hop songs in which they found religious Arabic phrases, namely "Mukkbang" by Jay Park, "Plain Jane" by A\$AP Ferg featuring Nicki Minaj, "Arab Money" by Busta Rhymes, and "Bad Religion" by Frank Ocean. One also mentioned Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody." While the song does not belong to the R&B or hip-hop genre, we will also analyze the lyrics. Below are the lyrics of each song; phrases in bold are the religious Arabic phrases.

Table 2. Song lyrics containing religious Arabic phrases

Song Title	Lyrics
Mukkbang - Jay Park	Worship me like <i>Allah</i> Get it done like <i>wallah</i>
Plain Jane - A\$AP Ferg	"Ride with the mob, <i>Alhamdulillah</i> Check in with me and do your job Ferg is the name, Ben Baller did the chain Tourneau for the watch, presi Plain Jane" "Ride with Minaj, mmh <i>Mashallah</i> Check in with me, then do your job Queen is the name, Raffaello did the chain This is monsay, patty Plain Jane"
Arab Money - Busta Rhymes	<i>La ilaha illa Allah</i> , ha la ili, hay yo Hili b'Allah, hey, hili bay yo We getting Arab money We getting Arab money Hala sheiki, ha lini falla Mili ha lan shi inni mala
Bad Religion - Frank Ocean	He said, " <i>Allahu akbar</i> " I told him, "Don't curse me" "Bo Bo, you need prayer" I guess it couldn't hurt me
Bohemian Rhapsody - Queen	I'm just a poor boy nobody loves me He's just a poor boy from a poor family, Spare him his life from this monstrosity Easy come, easy go, will you let me go <i>Bismillah!</i> No, we will not let you go (Let him go!) <i>Bismillah!</i> We will not let you go (Let him go!) <i>Bismillah!</i> We will not let you go (Let me go) Will not let you go (Let me go)(Never) Never let you go (Let me go) (Never) let you go (Let me go) Ah No, no, no, no, no, no, no Oh mama mia, mama mia, mama mia, let me go Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me, for me, For me~

The overall meaning of each song and the use of religious Arabic phrases in the lyrics are explained as follows. (1) Mukkbang! (Remix) - Lil Cherry & GOLDBUUDA ft. Jay Park, BIBI, Dumbfoundead. Mukkbang (떡방) is a genre of video that originated in South Korea that features a person eating in large quantities in one sitting. Nowadays, 'eat' is a slang term for making and enjoying the money obtained through hard work. Hence, as the title suggests, the song narrates the artists' hustles and how they take pleasure in their achievement, which is fame and money. The line in which Jay Park tells the listeners to "worship him like he is Allah" signifies that he has reached the peak of fame and feels that he deserves to be treated in such a way. Many of his fans, not only the Muslims, were upset because no one should ever compare themselves to the Deity. After backlashes being thrown at him, Jay Park apologized and revised the line "Worship me like Allah" into "Jaw drop, jaw drop." (2) Plain Jane (Remix) - A\$AP Ferg ft. Nicki Minaj. While the phrase 'plain Jane' refers to an unattractive female, the song does not touch on that subject. According to Ferg, in an interview with Genius, "Plain Jane" represents someone's unembellished class and raw emotion. As for the use of 'alhamdulillah,' Ferg clarified that the word is "just another way

to say all praise goes to God." (3) Arab Money - Busta Rhymes ft. Ron Browz. The song channels the artists' vision of living a life like rich individuals from Middle Eastern countries who are known for their luxurious lifestyles. There are also many references to influential figures from the Middle East, namely Yasser Arafat and Prince Al-Waleed Bin Talal. Even though the lyrics read 'La ilaha illa Allah,' Busta Rhymes took some liberty with the pronunciation. In the song, he uses it as a backing track that bridges the verses and includes it in the chorus before the beat drops. While seemingly harmless, this still evoked controversy among the listeners. In fact, the real issue lies in the second verse, in which he raps, "Y'all already know, I got the streets buzzin' // While I make you bow down and make Salaat like a Muslim." Similar to Jay Park's instance, this line signifies that Busta thinks he is to be worshipped for his money. (4) Bad Religion - Frank Ocean. The lyrics in "Bad Religion" portrays Frank Ocean's religious struggles as a gay man. While he still believes and loves his God, he feels cornered as his belief does not accept homosexuality. Ocean also narrates his unrequited love story through the lyrics. This song also touches on society's perception of same-sex relationships. Despite the intense emotions he is experiencing, he feels compelled to keep them bottled up. He is even more heartbroken because so many aspects of human lives, including religion, frown on such relationships. (5) Bohemian Rhapsody - Queen. "Bohemian Rhapsody" was Freddie Mercury's, the band's frontman, confession of being queer. The song narrates his imagination of how positive his life would have been if he could be himself for the rest of his life. In his biography, the phrase 'Bismillah' in the third verse is a nod to his upbringing in majority-Muslim Zanzibar.

The next step is to explore the students' opinions of the portrayal of religious Arabic phrases in hip-hop and R&B song lyrics. They were asked to position themselves on the three-point Likert scale about their understanding of the lyrics and what they think about the existence of such religious Arabic phrases in those song lyrics. Some express agreement, disagreement, and uncertainty.

Table 3. Students' understanding of the lyrics

Question	Yes	Not sure	No
Do you know the meaning of the lyrics?	17 (68%)	4 (16%)	4 (16%)

Table 3 indicates that most of the respondents who have heard of English R&B and hip-hop songs containing religious Arabic phrases understand the meaning of the lyrics. Out of 25 students, 17 (68%) understand the meaning of the song lyrics that they have heard, 4 (16%) are not sure, and 4 (16%) do not.

When asked about their opinions on the use of religious Arabic phrases in such songs, the majority believe that it is inappropriate, while a minority think that it is all right as long as the phrases are used appropriately. The representing opinions of the same stance are as follows.

EV: Considering the context of the song, I think it sounds inappropriate and does not feel right.

NA (on the lyrics in "Mukkbang"): It is inappropriate because the singer is not Muslim, and he seems to compare himself with Allah.

Both EV and NA think that it is inappropriate to use religious phrases in songs that include references to obscene social behaviors. NA specifically argues that artists with no relation to Islam should avoid using such phrases if they do not know the meaning because it will cause a great deviation from the original positive intention of Islamic verses.

UD: In my opinion, as long as the phrase is not used in a deviating or mocking way, there is no problem. I believe many Muslims feel appreciative towards the phenomenon because hip-hop culture is 'far' from Islam, and to have artists/idols you like saying something close to you... there must be a sense of acknowledgment.

On the other hand, UD believes that Muslims will appreciate their favorite artists slipping some religious Arabic phrases into their songs as long as they are used accordingly. It is inferred that UD believes anyone can use such phrases, even if they are not Muslims.

In order to further investigate opinions toward this phenomenon, we conducted an in-depth interview with Jamal, a fellow student with a great deal of understanding of Islam. The same set of questions was asked, but the difference is that Jamal was given the full version of the five songs' lyrics above as a reference. The interview has resulted in some key points as follows.

If the rapper has good intentions, but he does not know how to utilize the religious Arabic phrases correctly, then he belongs to the Mu'ridhun (those who turned away) group.

However, if he lies or covers his real intentions, namely to play with the name of Allah, it means he is of the Mu'aaridhun (those who oppose or refute).

Ignorance or not having awareness of this could also be influenced by culture. For instance, in Turkey, both Muslims and non-Muslims are used to saying "in shaa Allah" in their conversations. The reason is because their lingua franca is Arabic. Thus, they refer to these sentences as just general sayings, without having any religious meaning.

Apart from that, taking the name of Allah like masyaAllah, Alhamdulillah, etc. in explicit and ambiguous lyrics is prohibited because it can be a kind of behavior that plays with Allah's name. Wallahu a'lam.

Overall, it can be concluded that if the artist is ignorant about the meaning of the religious Arabic phrases but originally had good intentions of using it, then it is tolerable. However, if the case is otherwise, then it can be considered blasphemy to Allah.

5. Conclusions

To sum up, the present study shows that most of the participants feel that it is inappropriate to slip some religious Arabic phrases into song lyrics that refer to sinful social behaviors, such as sex, illicit goods use, and vulgar language. When the phrases occur in such lyrics, the song will not sound right to the listeners' ears, especially Muslims. Furthermore, some students argue that artists who do not identify with Islamic teachings must not use such phrases if they have no idea of the context because it will cause a great deviation from the original positive intention or worse, blaspheming Allah. This is in accordance with the rudimentary principle that it is important for language users to understand the context of a phrase before employing it.

Referring to At-Tawbah: 65-66:

If you question them, they will certainly say, "We were only talking idly and joking around." Say, "Was it Allah, His revelations, and His Messenger that you ridiculed?" Make no excuses! You have lost faith after your belief. If We pardon a group of you, We will punish others for their wickedness.

Tawhid means agreement, while ridiculing means otherwise. The verse above depicts a hypocrite. It is impossible for a Tawhid person to make such jokes. If he makes fun of it, it will be known that he does not glorify Allah because mocking negates exaltation. Thus, in the case of using religious Arabic phrases in English hip-hop and R&B, if the phrases are used in a hypocritical context or to make fun of religion, then it is considered inappropriate and strictly prohibited.

Author Contribution

The author contributed fully to the research.

Funding

This research did not receive funding from anywhere.

Ethical Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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